

## **Crafting a More Effective Approach Toward North Korea**

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I feel very honored to have the opportunity to discuss with you today how to more effectively deal with North Korea. I will do my best to offer assessments and recommendations that have not already been made by the previous distinguished speakers, at least one of whom has been focusing on North Korea longer than I have been alive!

As with the economy, we face a much more grave and complex situation with the North today than when President Bush took office eight years ago. I wish I could offer you a magic formula for success with the North. What I do know is what does not work: namely, the name-calling and disengagement of the early Bush years, or the unconditional engagement of the previous two South Korean governments. I believe we stand the greatest chance of succeeding if we maintain a two-track (bilateral and multilateral) approach that carefully balances carrots and sticks, in close coordination with the other key players.

I would like to share with you seven propositions that help define where we currently stand. First, I am agnostic when it comes to whether the North is prepared to completely give up its nuclear programs, materials and weapons. Anyone who tells you with conviction what the North is or is not prepared to do is revealing more about their own worldview than about Pyongyang's intentions. As time goes by and North Korea's nuclear arsenal grows, I grow increasingly pessimistic. However, that does not mean that we should stop trying to engage the North. Alas, any new nuclear deal with North Korea would indeed be, to borrow from Samuel Johnson's adage about remarriage, "the triumph of hope over experience."

Second, one thing I am reasonably certain of is that the North will undertake one or more provocative acts in the coming weeks and months. The rumor *du jour* is a long-range missile launch. A second nuclear test cannot be ruled out either. Given how poorly the previous missile and nuclear tests went, it is difficult to say which system the North is more desperate to test. As a Californian, I do not stay up at night worrying about North Korean bombs raining down on my family and friends. A military skirmish with the South cannot be ruled out, but is unlikely if for no other reason than it would most likely provide further confirmation of the North's military inadequacies. Recent *Washington Post* hand-wringing aside, we will have to see a provocation for what it is: A scream for attention. Unfortunately, ignoring North Korea is not an option.

Third, we must assume that Kim Jong-il has now made a full recovery from his probable health problems last summer. Since he will soon turn 67 (or 68) and is not the picture of health, we must be prepared for a serious disruption in any negotiations, given the underwhelming nature of his three sons and (not coincidentally) lack of a clear succession plan. As long as he is

reasonably healthy, I find assertions about a divide between hardliners and softliners in the North to be highly speculative at best and at worst disingenuous. The notion of factions in a one-man totalitarian system is almost absurd. That is not to say that the North Korean military has not played a more prominent role of late. However, I think this is most likely by design: The North is probably playing a game of good cop, bad cop.

Fourth, having made several visits over the past five years to the China-North Korea border, where I have spoken with dozens of Chinese and North Koreans, the North is not “on the precipice of famine.” There are two reasons for this. The North had a decent harvest last fall and China is covering most of the shortfall. That is not to say that there is sufficient food or that there are no pockets of hunger, but wide-scale famine is not in the cards unless Mother Nature strikes hard. That means that the modest humanitarian assistance currently being provided by the United States (500,000 metric tons of grain) is unlikely to provide much in the way of leverage over the North. The U.S. and the rest of the world have sought to maintain the Ronald Reagan principle that “a hungry child knows no politics,” but the reality is that Northern good behavior almost invariably precedes increased assistance.

Fifth, while the human rights situation in the North is as abysmal as ever, it must invariably take a back seat to our national security interests. The nuclear negotiations are too complex and difficult for the issue to become a focal point right now. However, this is not to say that the issue should be merely given lip service by our diplomats. I was encouraged by Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen and this committee’s efforts to reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Act last fall. It took a while, but we have finally put our money where our mouths are by making it easier for North Korean refugees to resettle in the United States. Increasing Korean language radio broadcasts to the North is also a most worthy endeavor. The folks working at VOA and RFA are most impressive. I have listened to and evaluated their broadcasts. My biggest wish is that the funds be more expeditiously allocated than they were in the original act. I also hope that a full-time human rights envoy will be appointed this time. Two can play the good cop/bad cop game.

My sixth proposition is that Japan will continue to be part of the problem rather than part of the solution when it comes to engaging North Korea, despite being one of our most important allies. By allowing the abduction of a handful of its citizens decades ago to dominate all policy considerations when it comes to the North, Tokyo has become irrelevant at the nuclear talks. More importantly, Japan took the biggest carrot the world had to offer the North, billions of dollars in developmental assistance in lieu of reparations for colonial rule, off the table. Pyongyang is either unwilling or unable to provide Tokyo with the evidence it demands. Removing North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terror did not weaken our negotiating position with the North as it was essentially a symbolic gesture, but it did lead to a sense of betrayal in Japan.

My final proposition arguably describes the biggest constraint on our North Korea policy options. There are virtually no conditions under which Beijing will curtail (much less cut off) its assistance to the North. The Bush Administration liked to insist that the reason North Korea came back to the negotiating table in late 2006 was because China had gotten tough with the North by backing the UN sanctions resolution after the North conducted a nuclear test. While Beijing was clearly not happy, the bottom line was that China never implemented the resolution,

nor was there any interruption in economic assistance from China. For China, stability on its northeastern border is far more important than denuclearization. Even in the face of a global economic crisis, Beijing appears willing to spend several billion dollars a year to prop up the North.

These seven propositions leave us in an undeniably difficult, but not impossible place. In my remaining time, I would like to suggest a “smart power” strategy for negotiating with North Korea. It may very well be that in the end, the North will try to play it both ways: continue to negotiate for goodies while never giving up its nuclear trump card. After all, that is essentially what it has done for the past 16 years. We may have to live with the fact that the nuclear talks may be little more than a “crisis management mechanism”. But managing a crisis is far better than ignoring it, and remarriages happen all the time.

At the core of “smart power” is leveraging our alliances. The one country I have left out of my discussion so far is the one government we can closely coordinate a potentially more effective policy with: Seoul. Ironically, even though South Koreans have opted for a more conservative president and legislature and Americans the opposite, the prospects for effective coordination have never been better. That is because based on the worldviews Presidents Obama and Lee Myung-bak have espoused so far and the foreign policy teams they are currently putting together, both are pragmatic moderates. President Lee is a businessman, not an ideologue. I have met with him and his foreign policy team countless times. Liberals in Seoul blame them for the North’s increasingly bellicose policy toward the South, but really all Lee and his team have done is recalibrate an unconditional engagement policy that had yielded Seoul little in return. A strong majority of the Korean public (to the extent they even care about North Korea) continue to favor a more balanced policy toward Pyongyang. In fact, Seoul’s approach is no different than the Obama Administration’s is likely to be.

Given the lack of a major shift in South Korean policy, why has Pyongyang become so bellicose? For the simple reason that the North potentially has much to gain and little to lose. Despite all the rhetoric, the joint industrial complex in Kaeseong expanded its output by more than 20% last year and South Korean NGOs maintained their cooperation projects. Like Obama, Lee refuses to let his antagonists get him worked up and has repeatedly stated that he will wait for the North to come around. What does the North have to gain? Besides trying to drive a wedge between Washington and Seoul, the North seeks a return to the era of no-strings-attached largesse. The North only sees Seoul as a cash register, not a nuclear negotiating partner. Moreover, they also know that if they can cut a deal with Washington, Seoul will have little choice but to pay for it. Kim Jong-il may also have concluded that he needs at least one major enemy to justify his failed rule.

A second component of “smart power” is trying to engage our adversaries in negotiations, both multilaterally and bilaterally. Bilateral negotiations will likely prove to be the key to a breakthrough, but maintaining the six-party talks and reinvigorating trilateral coordination between Washington, Seoul and Tokyo will also be vital. Even if we are essentially on the same page with the South, there are still fears that the Obama team could get too far out in front.

Before bilateral talks resume, it is imperative that Secretary of State Clinton selects a capable negotiator that has experience with North Korea. We simply do not have time for a new envoy to get to know his counterparts and learn the hard way how to negotiate with the North. I can think of at least six former government officials that would fill the bill. However, given the daunting nature of the job, it may not be easy to find a taker. The North has no peers when it comes to insults and brinksmanship. Moreover, the heavy diplomatic lifting has only just begun. Based on the eight-stage negotiating model I helped develop for the International Crisis Group several years ago (available at [www.icg.org](http://www.icg.org)), we're at the start of Phase Three.

I would like to close by sharing with you my favorite Korean proverb, which can serve us well not only in dealing with North Korea, but also the broader economic challenges that we currently face, "Even when the sky comes crashing down, there is a hole through which we can pass." Please help the Obama team find that hole. Thank you for your time.